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C O N F I D E N T I A L GUATEMALA 001900

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN AND CA/OCS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [CASC](#) [ASEC](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [GT](#)

SUBJECT: FRG ORGANIZES VIOLENT PROTESTS

REF: GUATEMALA 1888

Classified By: Ambassador J.R. Hamilton for reason 1.5 (b).

1. (C) Summary: In response to a major legal reversal in Rios Montt's bid for the Presidency (reftel), thousands of well-organized Rios Montt supporters took to the streets of the capital on July 24, closing off strategic intersections with burning tires. Mobs have targeted opposition newspapers as well as surrounding the Constitutional and Supreme Court buildings. One journalist is confirmed dead from a heart attack as he was covering events. Another was beaten and doused with gasoline before being pulled to safety. The GOG has been slow to mobilize police resources and the Ambassador has called President Portillo, Minister of Interior Calderon and Foreign Minister Gutierrez, to urge restoration of order. Portillo announced at 3:00 PM that he has ordered combined police/military elements to restore order. A warden message has been transmitted, visa applicants were sent home, services for Amcits continue, but we will be on an "essential staff" basis July 25. End Summary.

2. (U) On the morning of July 24, pro-Rios Montt protesters launched coordinated actions across the city. The mobs, which include thugs in ski masks armed with guns, molotov cocktails, and sticks initially targeted the opposition news media and the offices of opposition financier Dionisio Gutierrez. Buses are reported to be bringing more protesters in from the countryside. Mobs are reported to be forming outside the Constitutional Court building, vowing not to leave until Rios Montt is registered as a candidate. Another group has taken positions outside a single-gated residential community where numerous politicians and diplomats, including U.S. Mission personnel, live. The protesters vow to block the entrance for at least three days and have set up tents and are passing out food. Human Rights Ombudsman, Sergio Morales has been threatened and has abandoned his office. The Ministry of Education has recommended all classes be canceled tomorrow. The Bi-National Center has also closed.

4. (C) In response to reports that police were withdrawing from areas where protesters were gathering, the Ambassador twice informed Minister of Interior Calderon that the Embassy would be harshly critical if the police allowed the mobs to become violent or if the situation descended into general disorder. During the second conversation, Calderon told the Ambassador he was sending reinforcements to the offices of newspapers Siglo 21 and El Periodico as well as to the business center that seem to be most threatened. Shortly thereafter, Foreign Minister Gutierrez told the Ambassador he would seek to promote a gentleman's agreement for keeping a lid on the situation once the immediate situation is contained. Gutierrez said President Portillo supports the idea. At 3:00 PM, state television broadcast a Portillo announcement pledging to restore public order through a combined police/military response. In a telephone conversation with the Ambassador, Portillo offered to focus police attention on disturbances in residential areas and said he would appeal to the FRG leadership to turn the disturbances off.

5. (C) Earlier, on the evening of July 23, the Ambassador spoke with FRG Congressman Aristides Crespo to urge the FRG to resist the temptation to engage in public disorder in response to the court decision. A testy Crespo denied that any mobilization was centrally planned, and pointedly refused to commit to the need for protests to remain peaceful. During the morning commute of July 24, Embassy officers noted a large number of portable toilets had appeared overnight in a park over a major intersection. Other officers heard reports of trucks laden with food and water circulating in areas where demonstrations later "spontaneously occurred."

6. (C) The Embassy has not been targeted in any of the disturbances. Employees have restricted their movements, security forces have been pulled inside the fence line to prevent accidental encounters with protesters. Approximately 150 visa applicants were given new appointments and sent home. A warden message advising Amcits of the situation has been cleared with CA and transmitted. Amcits still have access to the Embassy building. The EAC convened at 2:30 PM local time and developed staffing plans, alternate lodging for those living in affected areas, and considered ways to reunite separated families. We will operate with only

essential staff on July 25.
HAMILTON